



The Judges Survey

One of the four key areas of the OLC Five Year Strategy is to ‘Develop a program to ensure that there are sufficient competent judges, ring and chief stewards into the future’. It has been apparent for some time that shows are having difficulty in getting people to judge, especially for the higher classes. The number of judges retiring (or taking on fewer appointments) is much higher than the numbers of new people qualifying to judge. A true judging crisis. This puts increased strain on hard pressed show societies seeking to run shows.

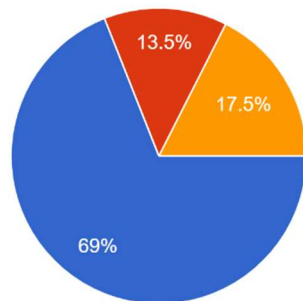
Without judges it would be impossible for the sport of RKC Competitive Obedience to continue and so the OLC see the retention of existing judges and attraction of new judges as a very high priority. To understand the thoughts and wishes of the Obedience Community a judges survey was created and the results of this are shared here.

The Responses

There were 371 responses to the survey of which 260 respondents judge at RKC shows and a further 50 respondents no longer judge. The recent analysis of entries in the 2025 season* recorded 489 judges, suggesting that this survey has captured the views of between 50% and 60% of the judging population (depending on when some of the respondents stopped judging).

1. Do you judge at RKC licensed obedience shows?

371 responses

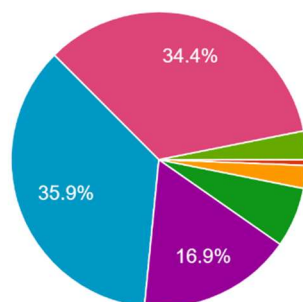


- Yes (Please go to Q4 and complete the rest of the survey)
- I used to but I now no longer judge (Please go to Q3 and complete the rest of the survey)
- I have won out of Beginners so am eligible to judge but I do not judge (Please just answer questions 2, 13 and 14)

Whilst not everyone answered the question on their age group (which is fair enough), 70% of those who did are aged 60 or over (225 people) with 110 of those being 70 or over. With the physical requirements of judging this could also be an important factor in future.

5. Which age group are you in?

320 responses



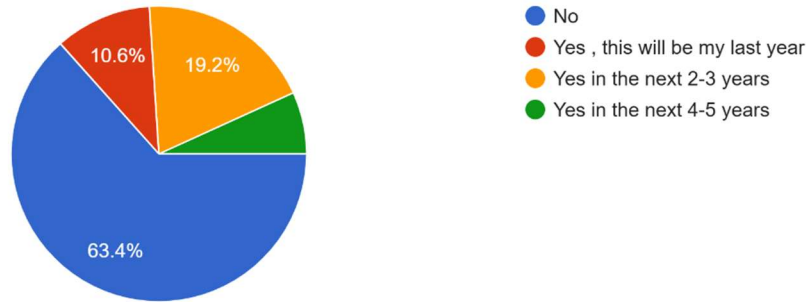
- Under 20
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70+
- Prefer not to say



A very worrying result coming out of the survey was that 28 judges are planning to retire this year, with a further 51 judges planning to retire in the next 2-3 years. A total loss of 30% of judges responding to this survey (79 people). Given the existing difficulties in finding judges this represents a huge loss to Obedience.

6. Are you considering retiring from judging soon?

265 responses



Even more worryingly, in 2025 just 9 people passed the RKC exams to become new judges.*

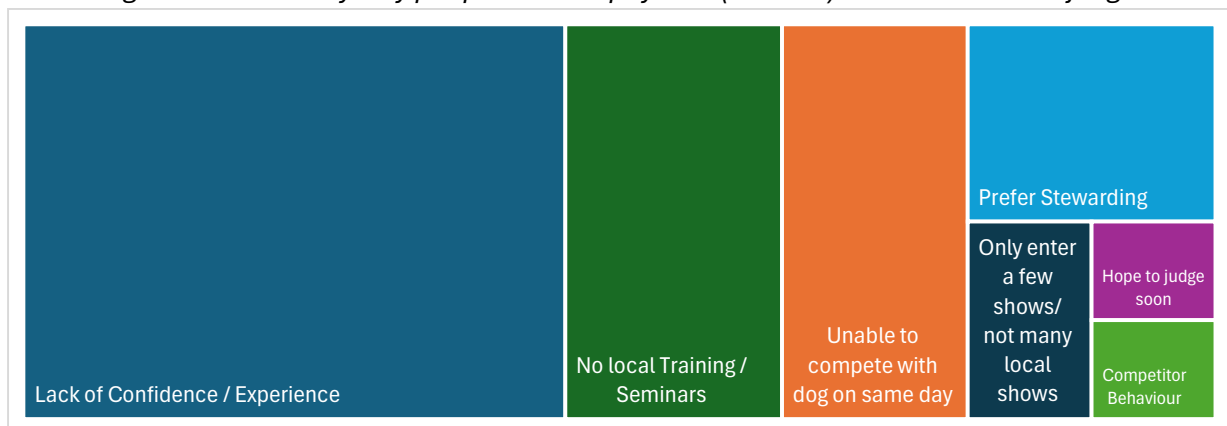
To make up for the predicted loss of judges there would need to be at least 27 new judges a year qualifying, just to stay at the current low level. To have an effect on the existing shortage that figure would need to be more like 40 per year. This appears to be a very real, and very imminent, judging crisis.

Why don't people judge

Of the 65 reponses from those who had won out of beginners and who would be eligible (to qualify to) judge 14 people (11%) had physical or other personal limitations that they felt stopped them. This raises the question of what accomodations could be made that would allow people with physical (or other) limitations to be able to judge.

Of the remaining 51 responses a massive 69% (35 people) stated they either did not have the confidence or the experience to judge, with 9 of those mentioning the lack of local judging exams/ seminars as a reason. An additional 7 people also mentioned the lack of local exams/seminar. This gives a potential pool of 42 new judges if training and mentoring schemes where in place to meet their needs to increase their skills and confidence.

Reasons given in the survey why people without physical (or other) limitations do not judge:





Another big reason for not judging was the inability to show a dog on the same day as judging (30% of respondents mentioned this reason). The reduced number of local and one day shows (compared to ten years ago) means the opportunities to compete have been reduced for many, so giving up a day to judge (or steward) clearly impacts the opportunities to show your dog and stops some people from volunteering to judge.

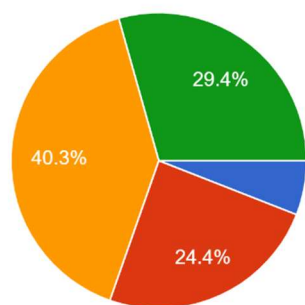
Worryingly the behaviour of competitors (rudeness, keeping judges waiting - particularly mentioned in relation to judging Open C) was also mentioned as reasons people choose not to judge.

How can we encourage judges to judge the 'Higher' classes

Encouragingly, given the perceived shortage of Class C judges, 70% of respondents who judge are qualified to judge C and/or Ticket.

7. Which classes are/were you qualified to judge?

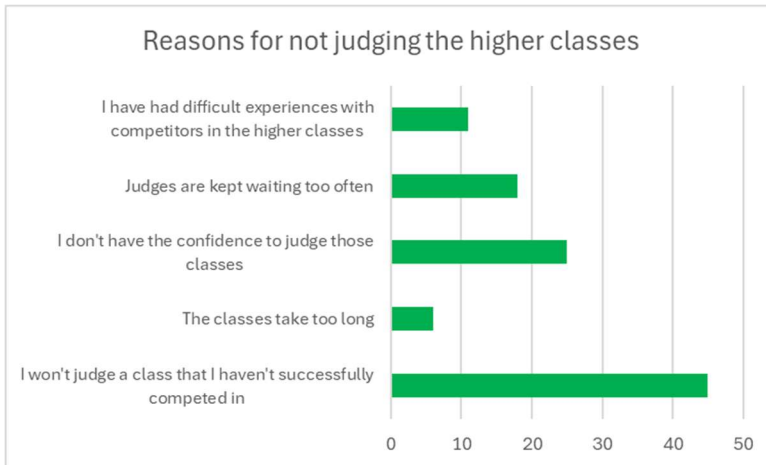
303 responses



- I am a new judge so still completing my first 6 appointments
- Up to Class B
- Up to Class C
- Up to Championship C

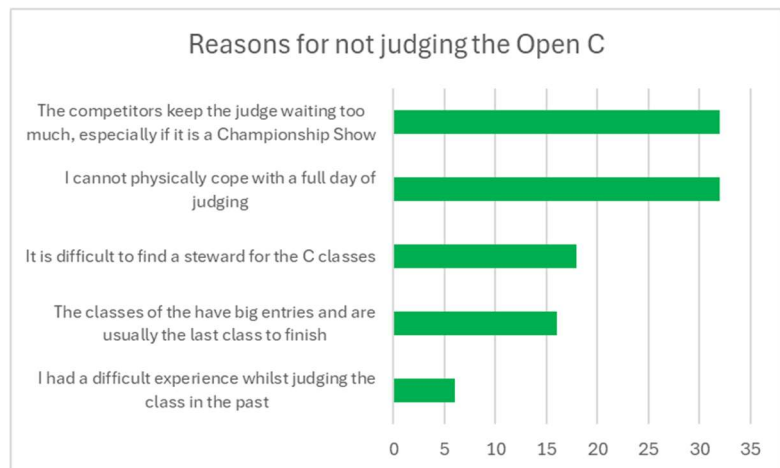
However a number of reasons were given for NOT judging the higher classes:

<p>“Not invited”</p> <p>“People in the sport been very vocal about a judge should have competed at level they’re judging. Whilst I disagree for many reasons this is my hobby and I’m not prepared to have to deal with criticism. So I focus on the lower classes and do my best to make them as enjoyable as possible to encourage people into our sport.”</p> <p>“The negative comments of others regarding judges who should not judge a class you have not won. I am confident to judge them but do not want the hassle that goes with it from other people’s comments”</p> <p>“Finding a C steward can be challenging”</p> <p>“Working up the grades and plans for C next year”</p>	<p>“Never been asked! Was once asked to judge C but refused as the competitors can be very difficult”</p> <p>“Rather than "wont", I don't feel I should judge a class that I haven't competed in. Working towards getting the experience though to take on C”</p> <p>“I don't feel I have enough experience yet to judge them but hope to start judging B by next year”</p> <p>“I prefer judging the lower classes, as I feel it's important, especially below novice, that people are encouraged to stay in the sport, and from personal experience, have witnessed that this isn't always happening”</p>	<p>“I no longer feel that I have the physical or mental stamina”</p> <p>“I currently have a knee problem”</p> <p>“I'll retire from higher classes sooner due to c takes longer and health and standing”</p> <p>“I don't enjoy judging classes involving Scent. Also, my current dogs don't compete in Obedience as they prefer other sports, so I feel I would be doing a disservice to higher level competitors by not being current enough.”</p>	<p>“I feel I'm getting too old now”</p> <p>“I dont do CCs anymore due to health reasons . Mainly because of how much stress it involves”</p> <p>“Am not fit enough now”</p> <p>“I am unable to stand for the length of time needed to judge the higher classes.”</p> <p>“I like judging the lower classes as i always find something positive to say to the nervous handlers.”</p>
---	--	--	--



Of the main options, the view that people did not want to judge a class they had not worked took precedent, which creates its own issues given that 60% of entries in 2025 were in class A or below.

For the further question on why people don't judge open C the physicality of judging at this level, the size of the classes and competitors keeping the judges waiting were all big scores:



This question had the following 'other' responses:

- "I always get asked to judge C but often refuse, if someone is trying to qualify for CC coming under the same judge prevents them progressing"
- "I have always judged novice and am now doing A. I do not have enough experience competing at C level to feel comfortable judging C"
- "I dont feel confidence enough yet to judge C"
- "Not confident to judge C"
- "Not yet enough experience"
- "My limitation on number of C's judge per year is usually down to the availability of/need to get a steward"
- "Technically I am qualified, but dont feel I have enough experience yet and I haven't had a dog get to C to be able to work the class"
- "I haven't been judging C as there was confusion over the amount of B's that needed to be judged first"
- "Some competitors try to intimidate judges and question marks lost"
- "I do not work C yet so wouldn't feel comfortable judging "
- "I want to shadow a few before I judge but have had so many appointments I have not had time to do so."
- "You are often kept waiting for competitors- particularly judging open C at Championship shows"
- "Don't feel it's right to judge a class I've never worked"
- "Not currently physically able to "
- "I do not have a dog working that class"
- "I won't judge a class I haven't/ don't compete in"
- "Very difficult competitors. I have stewarded C a few times, that was enough!"
- "I find the concentration needed very tiring and don't want to make mistakes"
- "I have never judged a C class and have never wanted to. I do Pre Beginner up to and including A."
- "Not invited"
- "No longer involved. Too old/difficult to walk"

All of the above give strong indicators on what could be preventing people from judging including views on experience, physicality and the behaviour of competitors. Working on removing these barriers should be a priority for the Obedience Community.



What about the 'Lower' classes?

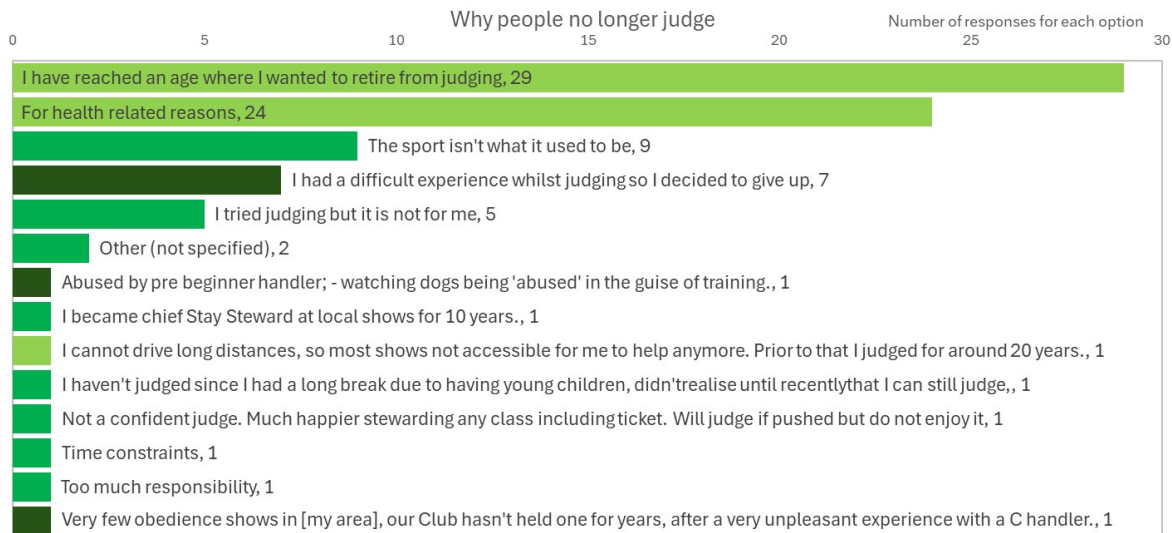
The feedback on why people did not want to judge the lower classes can be summarised as follows:

- A preference to judge more experienced handlers
- The classes being hard to judge
 - Too complicated
 - Too much starting and stopping
- Disagreeing with the use of food in the ring
- Not being a valid introduction to Competitive Obedience

Again, these are areas which the Obedience Community can consider to encourage more judges come forward to support Show Secretaries in holding the lower classes at their show.

What has stopped people judging?

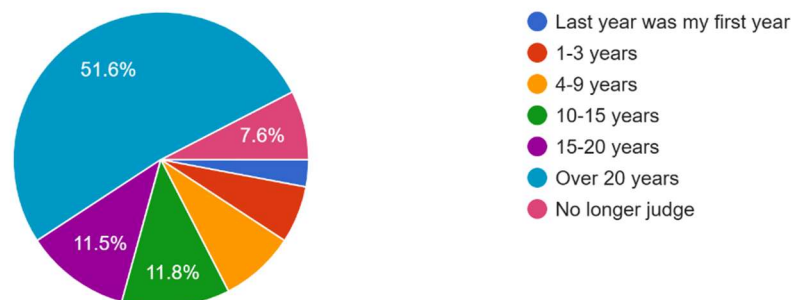
The majority of judges have stopped because of age or health but a number of people stopped because of a difficult experience whilst they were judging.



In terms of experience, most people have been judging for over 20 years, with only 28 people (who responded to the survey) that have been judging for 3 years or fewer. It is therefore not surprising that judges are retiring on age and/or health grounds.

4. How long have you been judging at RKC licensed obedience shows?

304 responses



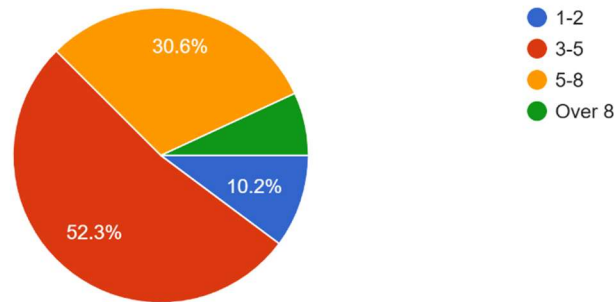


How can we get more people to judge?

Of those responding to the survey over 80% judged three or more times in the year.

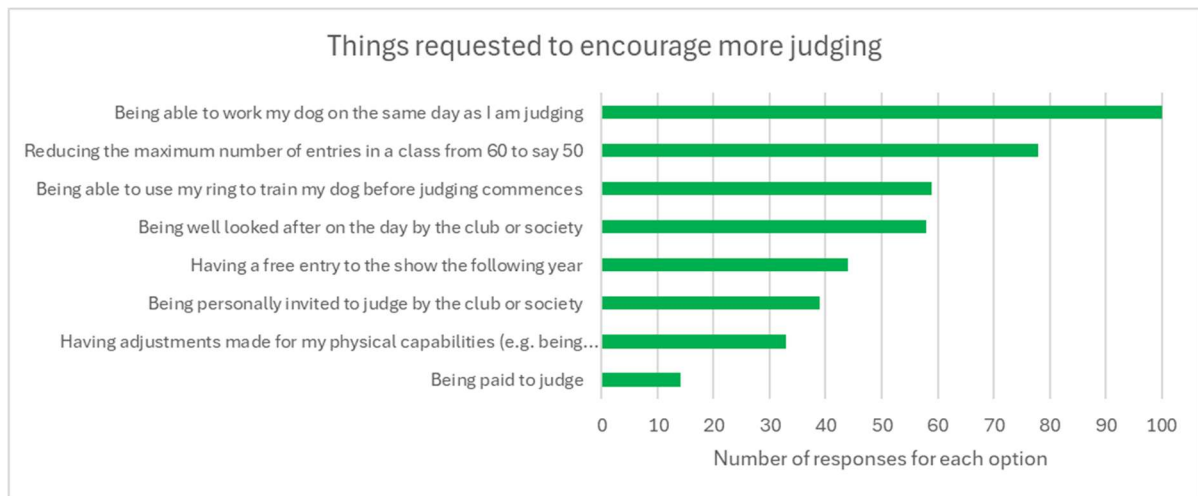
8. How many judging appointments do you/did you accept each year?

304 responses



When asked what you would consider an incentive to take on more judging appointments or to start judging over 50% (187 respondents) said that they judged their fair share.

For the other respondents, the following incentives were given:



Clearly the ability to work your dog on the same day as you judge and/or being able to use your ring to train your own dogs before judging commences combined to be the most popular incentives, followed closely by reduction in maximum class size. The latter could create more classes, but this could be offset by more people willing to judge those smaller classes.

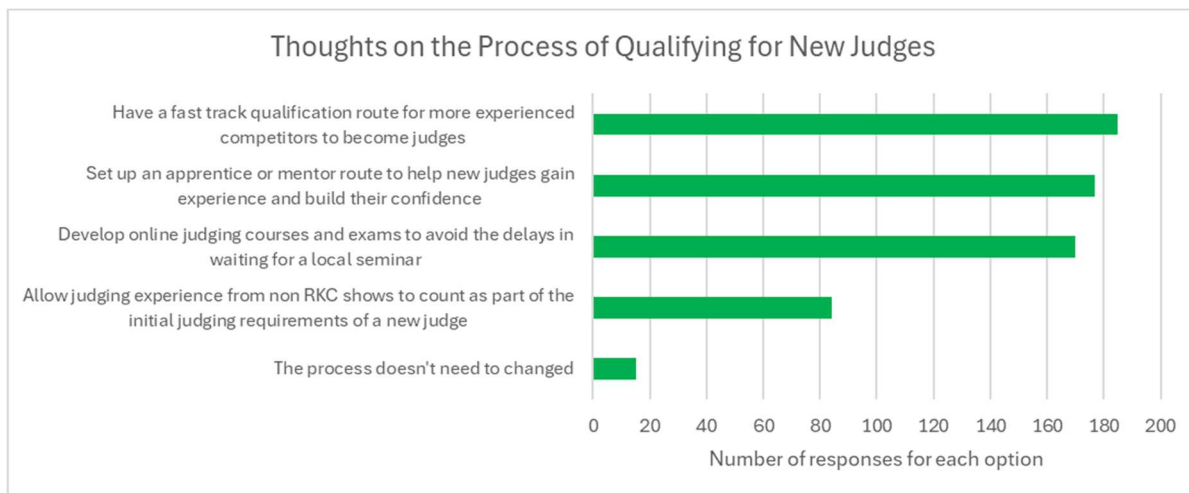
Other comments included:

- "Encouragement and positivity from the obedience community"
- "Full running orders to keep classes moving instead of waiting an hour or more for somebody to rock up"
- "Understanding better what I need to do to become a judge."
- "Training opportunities to become a judge"
- "Finding the opportunities to steward so I qualify to judge"
- "Shadowing and practising might help with the anxiety and nerves, with a strong steward to rescue me if needed."
- "Having an alternative way to do the judging seminar that doesn't require me to travel miles and at a cost to me in money and time. I am yet to see the value in the seminars as I don't feel judging standards have improved since these were implemented."
- "Less than 8 steward appointments needed before judging"
- "If everybody took their turn at judging/stewarding"



What about the current process to qualify as a Judge?

As shown earlier there is currently, or will very shortly be, a crisis in judging numbers. Without an increase in the rate that new judges are qualifying, those who are retiring this year or in the next 2-3 years cannot be replaced. Looking at how the process for qualification of new judges could be improved, there were 59 respondents that said they did not know enough about the process to comment (which in itself could be seen as concerning). The other main responses were:



A number of other thoughts were given by individuals:

“Having done the sport for 20+ years, competed to Class C level, judged at fun shows and stewarded for years, I feel I understand well the requirements for judging the classes I have worked without the seminar.”

“Go back to how it used to be without tests”

“It should be scrapped”

“The test hasn't improved judges

“Revert to the previous method of qualifying”

“Whole process needs reviewed”

“The process needs a complete overhaul. The process is not transparent and the party involved do not have any criteria for passes or any get up and go to encourage more people.”

“Monitor judging to ensure all judges are impartial”

“Social media posts can be quite negative regarding the experience of judging, which is something that's put me off looking into it more seriously. I think the narrative to judging needs to change, some examples of a day in the life of a judge or something similar so people can understand what it is really like and what would be expected of them. Some positivity surrounding judging and the experience of doing so, all the begging posts just make it appear judging is just a chore and not something people really want to do.

“Hold mini seminars at lunchtime at large shows and have a modular qualification - also have more people qualified to deliver the training”

“Some seminars already undertaken via platforms such as Zoom. This would be difficult for those requiring practical input. Improvements always possible.”

“Up to date online judges exam questions, no questions pre removal of stays”

“Simplify the process for C & champ. Have a clear process readily available to potential judges”

“Less than 8 stewarding appointments...I've already passed the exam and judge rally”

“Allow people to judge the classes they have won out of at any level”

“My only query would be about ‘experienced’ an how that's qualified. The approach in HR now is not to specify x years experience after all Is that 5 years experience or 1 year repeated 5 times”

“The judging qualification seminars are difficult to set up. I know experienced people who have tried and found the process difficult. Maybe we could look into this.”

“It's mostly fine except the availability of the course design seminar”

“No seminars in our area ne apart from approx ever 4 years”

“Have events where people can ‘have a go’ at judging with an experienced person by their side. Same for stewarding”

“Needs to be low/no cost”

“Better thought out ring plans. ie a decent space between rings . Not having dogs running towards S/A against next ring etc”

“Mentoring is a great way forward. Each new judge should have one.”

“The overriding comment here is don't compromise the quality of judging, especially for the higher classes. Whilst I think there is room for an on-line rules and regs (and indeed no reason why this should not be renewed every five years like other activities) I would retain the practical as this is where judges learn the most. especially when progressing up the classes.”



Conclusions

The OLC have reviewed the survey responses in detail and believe the following conclusions can be taken from them:

- There is a very real judging crisis in the sport of Competitive Obedience, with the number of people retiring far outstripping the number of new judges qualifying in recent years*
- The most important conclusion is that the sport faces a huge challenge in encouraging and training of confident new judges, in time to fill the gaps left by retirees.
- The fact that 98% of respondents (that felt they could offer a view) suggested a need to change the way in which judges qualify means that this should be looked into.
- Competitors' behaviour is affecting people's decisions to start or continue judging especially in terms of keeping judges waiting and/or in their manners to the judge.
- The ability to work a dog (or train it in the ring) was seen as the greatest way to incentivise people to judge.
- The thoughts on class sizes (and the physicality of judging) suggests investigating how judging can be made more accessible to those with physical (or other) restrictions.
- The ways in which Shows look after their judges (both in terms of class size and other considerations during the day) are important in the decision of whether or not to judge.

Next Steps

The OLC will continue to work with the Obedience Community to shape Discussion Points and Proposals based on what you have asked us to look at in this survey.

We will publicise the survey findings widely with the Obedience Community.

We will consider rule changes that incentivise existing judges such as the ability to compete in one class[JH3.1] with their dog.

We will establish a joint working group with the Obedience Accredited trainers to review the current routes to qualify to judge with a view to expanding the pathways and increasing the use of online courses.

** The figures quoted are from Annette Boulter's paper 'A look at UK Competitive Obedience Show Entries and Judging - 2025' and RKC figures on judging seminars and passes (shown right):*

RKC Office Statistics	Rules & Regs Seminars Held	Practical Seminars Held	Rules & Regs Passes	Practical Seminar Passes
2019	3	2	16	13
2020	0	0	0	0
2021	0	0	0	0
2022	0	2	35	13
2023	1	4	40	33
2024	Online	6	31	23
2025	Online	1	26	9